

University of New Hampshire



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Looking Back, Looking Forward: A Reflection on the 25th Anniversary of the UNH Sustainability Institute

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2022

*Tom Kelly, Founding Executive Director,
Sustainability Institute*

An anniversary provides an opportunity to pause and reflect: in this case, on the past 25 years of sustainability at UNH and in the wider world.

It has been a significant quarter of a century, so let's start with UNH.

Saying precisely when something started is always a bit dicey, but in many ways sustainability at UNH began in the early 1990s with organizing by a number of people including Dennis Meadows, Bob Eckert, Bert Cohen, and John Carroll

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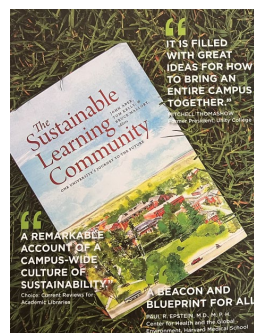
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among other faculty, staff, and students; and importantly, it also included Peter Lamb and Bill Mautz, who at the time were in leadership positions at the UNH Foundation and the College of Life Science and Agriculture respectively, and who were pivotal in advancing the effort. Another key factor was, of course, the [visionary philanthropy of Oliver Hubbard](#) who over a 4-year period gave a series of gifts that established a \$10M endowment to enable the building of a comprehensive, university-wide sustainability initiative that was further supported with a wide array of gifts including those from [Jo Lamprey and Tom Haas](#).

I was honored to be invited to join UNH as the Founding Executive Director of the UNH Sustainability Institute in 1997, and in this quarter of a century since, collaboration across and beyond the campus have resulted in UNH establishing itself as a national leader in sustainability in higher education, an achievement recognized by our peers and reflected in our Platinum score in the Sustainability Tracking Assessment and Rating System (STARS) which serves as one of UNH's academic metrics to measure progress on strategic priorities. Along the way scores of creative approaches to curriculum, campus culture and practices, research, and engagement have established sustainability as an ethos and a core value in our institutional culture. Many of these initiatives are chronicled in our book [The Sustainable Learning Community: One University's Journey to the Future](#), a unique book written by more than 60 UNH faculty and Staff reflecting on the first ten years of our journey. And those from the subsequent fifteen years are described on our [website](#).



In the wider world, the past 25 years have been momentous from a sustainability standpoint, but unfortunately not in the way that we would have hoped. As a result of the reckless increase in the consumption of fossil fuels we've continued to alter the Earth's atmosphere [with GHG concentrations reaching levels not seen in millions of years](#); and as

predicted, global warming is now reaching [1.2C above pre-industrial levels](#), with devastating results across the globe and with more and worse impacts on the horizon including [here in New Hampshire](#).

Wildfires, droughts, extreme heat on the land and in the oceans from China to Iraq, and from the arctic to the western US and Canada; and extreme flooding with the recent event in Pakistan killing more than a thousand people and displacing millions as fully a third of the country is inundated.

It wasn't as if we didn't know this would be the result: in the second half of the 20th century we were repeatedly warned: from the 1988 Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere [Conference Statement](#) that begins "Humanity is conducting an unintended, uncontrolled, globally pervasive experiment whose ultimate consequences could be second only to a global nuclear war." And that same week in June of 1988 NASA scientist James Hansen testified to the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources that "Global warming has begun." And of course through the series of [IPCC reports](#) that synthesized the science looking across warming, impacts, and responsive actions, and in 1992 the [framework convention on climate change](#). We had all of the precious foreknowledge needed to respond. Unfortunately, we collectively failed over the last thirty years to respond ethically and politically, due in part to active disinformation campaigns born of voracious greed and corruption within a neo-liberal joyride that has driven perverse inequalities and hollowed out our public institutions and our democracy. And this, of course, impacts public health as our [life expectancy in the US has dropped sharply](#) with the biggest 2 year decline in almost 100 years and not just due to the pandemic.

As we pivot into the next 25 years, and think about where we will be at UNH and in the world in 2047, we have our work cut out for us.

Fortunately, many important building blocks are at hand: [A Congressional Climate Breakthrough](#) this summer, [in 2020, renewable electricity expanded at the fastest pace in two decades](#), and a [new generation of activists](#), including right here in [New Hampshire and at](#)

UNH are demanding and driving change even in the face of active resistance by powerful political and economic actors and [climate justice](#) is centering the rights of the most vulnerable in terms of impacts and solutions. And scores of public, non-profit, and private organizations are pushing in the same direction as the long-overdue transition to sustainability and resilience finally is picking up steam.

It is late, but the tide is turning, and now we need to awaken, or perhaps re-awaken, a consciousness of intergenerational stewardship, mutual caring and equity, and bold imaginings and collaborations.

This consciousness begins with actively acknowledging the reality of our collective situation and [the devastation and suffering that is already upon us](#); and it calls on us to contemplate the [very real risks of climate catastrophes](#) over the next 25 years, and to bring the resulting awareness and insights to the forefront of everything we do. Grounding ourselves in this awareness, we see that every increment of warming averted matters, and will save lives and reduce suffering. And, of course, we don't have the luxury of focusing on just one challenge due to the interrelated nature of crises such as [climate and biodiversity](#) or [food systems and democracy](#) as well as [racial equity](#), economic justice, and many other challenges. The shift in consciousness describes a change of [culture and world view](#) which gets to the [heart of education](#), which of course is our core mission as a University

As we look to the next 25 years of sustainability at UNH, including the development of a UNH 2030 Sustainability Vision over the coming months, and in the wider world, we would do well to give serious thought to the words of David Graeber and David Wengrow in their sweeping book, [The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity](#),

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“If, as many are suggesting, the future of our species’ future now hinges on our capacity to create something different, then what ultimately matters is whether we can rediscover the freedoms that make us human in the first place.”

And in asking how we, particularly in the West, got *stuck* in the unjust and destructive patterns of collective life that systematically corrode human dignity and the larger community of life, they introduce the hopeful possibility of getting “unstuck.” Creativity, freedom, imagination, experimentation and learning in service to the health and integrity our shared home and community of life are central to our humanity and to a truly sustainable future.



While we don’t know those who will be leading our efforts in 2047, we can nevertheless support them and give them more possibilities by doing the right things now. So let’s come together in common cause and connect all of our efforts to achieve a far greater positive impact than we could ever accomplish separately.

Tom Kelly

September, 2022

Photo credits:

Top left image of Tom Haas and Josephine A. Lamprey, Cheryl Senter;
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Image of Sustainable Learning Community book, Cheryl Senter

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